



A SHORT BIOGRAPHY OF  
**ANNIE BESANT**

C. JINARĀJADĀSA



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C. VINAYACHANDRAN

SCIENTIFIC PUBLICATIONS

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**ANNIE BESANT**

C. JINARAJADASA

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## PUBLISHERS' NOTE

This 'Short Biography of Annie Besant' was written by Mr C.Jinarajadasa in September, 1932, a year before Dr Besant passed on. In reprinting it the publishers have not made any changes from the original edition, and have left the text as it was written when Dr Besant was living.





## *A Short Biography of* Dr ANNIE BESANT

ON October 1st next\* Dr Annie Besant completes her 85th year. She is so well known throughout the world that any facts concerning her are eagerly read by everybody. She has lived such a dramatic life that in many ways she stands symbolic of some phases of the world's development. Her autobiography, written in 1893, brings the story of her life to 1891, when Madame Blavatsky passed away. That book reveals such dramatic events that it is one of the most fascinating

biographies to read. But since then so much more has happened in her life that there is no adequate biography today.

Dr Besant's father was an Englishman, but half Irish. Her mother was fully Irish. Though technically an Englishwoman, and though herself born in London, Dr Besant has always refused to call herself an Englishwoman, and always has said she is an Irishwoman. The Irish strain in her ancestry is seen in certain aspects of her character—in her intuitive nature, and also in a very subtle wit and instant retort. In private life particularly one of her charms is this extremely witty Irish element.

She was a devout Christian, and was married to an English clergyman at the

age of twenty; the awakening of her character made her challenge several of the Christian dogmas. It was not the challenge of unfaith, but rather of a highly spiritual nature that desired intensely not only to believe but also to understand. The impossibility of making logic out of Christian traditions made her leave the Church and become a Free-thinker.

She was already profoundly unhappy in her married life. Two children, a boy and a girl, had been born. She has said very little about what she suffered as a wife. In the course of the case which her husband brought against her to deprive her of her daughter, she was forced at last in defence to state how he had physically ill-treated her and turned her out of the

house. So terrible was her matrimonial tragedy that once, taking some poison in her hand, she thought of drinking it and so ending the horror of it all. As she was preparing to drink it she heard a clear voice of stern reproof, which said to her: 'O coward, coward, who used to dream of martyrdom and cannot stand a few years of woe.' The voice was so impressive that she did not feel it as unkind. It was like a whip applied to her, who from the days of girlhood had read lives of martyred saints and dreamed of the glory of martyrdom. She instantly threw the bottle out of the window, and never forgot the voice.

She left her husband, taking with her the little daughter. In the course of literary

work she came into close collaboration with Charles Bradlaugh. For many years the two worked together shoulder to shoulder, and raised the Free-thought movement to an unique height of intellectual vigour. The wonderful charm of her oratory, and the fire with which she denounced religious intolerance, made her an outstanding figure in public life, though in those Victorian days there was scarcely any calumny which was not spread about her by her orthodox opponents.

Circumstances at once plunged her into a series of dramatic struggles, the first of which was the battle for the publication of the Knowlton pamphlet. This was a pamphlet on birth control which had

already been published in England without let or hindrance. But some police official, egged on by the orthodox, prohibited its further sale as an 'obscene' work. Mr Bradlaugh and Mrs Besant promptly took up the challenge against the liberty of the press, reprinted the pamphlet, and put their names as the publishers. This identified her at once with the propaganda for birth control, though at the time when she republished the pamphlet her ideas were not at all clear on the matter. The publication was purely to defend the right of the public, and not for propaganda on birth control. Both she and Mr Bradlaugh were prosecuted, and both of them personally made their defence, not employing any

counsel. Mrs Besant showed remarkable forensic ability, and had she chosen a lawyer's career she would have become one of the most brilliant and successful of advocates. After losing the case in a lower court, they won it finally on appeal. Then promptly the pamphlet was withdrawn from circulation, as the right of the public had been vindicated.

Then it was that her husband moved to take her little girl away from her, claiming that she was an 'unfit' person because of her ideas. This plunged Mrs Besant into a second case. The record of it makes very striking reading as revealing both Mrs Besant's ability and the harshness of the judge. For many days she was herself her own counsel, and met point after point of

law and obstruction placed before her both by her husband's lawyer and the judge. She lost the case, and the deprivation of her child caused her profound grief. Later, both the girl and her elder brother, when they attained their majorities, became devoted admirers of their mother and remain so still.

We find her then passing on to a new phase of her career. In 1879 she matriculated at London University and went on with her studies in science. In 1881 she passed the Intermediate Examination of the university with honours in botany, taking all the subjects that were needed for the degrees of Bachelor of Science and of Medicine. She would have passed on to take her B.Sc.



degree later but for the threat by one of the professors, who was an examiner, that though all her answers were correct he would 'plough' her in the examination.

During this period she began giving lectures on science to classes of working men. Her brilliant lectures on the French Revolution, from the standpoint of the oppressed people, were commenced at this time. From 1885 she became closely associated with the Fabian Society, some of whose leaders are still alive, such as Bernard Shaw, Sidney Webb (Lord Passfield), and Sidney Olivier (Lord Olivier), Ramsay Macdonald joining them later. In 1885 she organized the strike of match girls working in Messrs. Bryant & May's factory, and won the fight for them.

It is at this time we find her as the Secretary of the Matchmakers Union.

Began then another phase when, feeling somewhat dissatisfied with her negative standpoint of Free-thought, she made researches into spiritualism, hypnotism, etc. They gave her no logical and clear proof of survival after death, though the phenomena were interesting. It was, however, at this epoch that there happened to her a second experience which was then unexplainable. Whilst she was sitting in the Fleet Street office of the *National Reformer*, and brooding over her disappointments in the search of truth, she suddenly heard a voice say to her: 'Are you willing to give up everything for the sake of learning the truth?' She

replied instantly: 'Yes, Lord.' She did not know who had spoken, but it was the same voice as on the earlier occasion.

Only a few days passed when Mr W.T. Stead, the editor of the *Review of Reviews*, sent her Madame Blavatsky's *Secret Doctrine* to review. He told her that none of the young men on his staff cared to undertake the two huge volumes, and added: 'You are quite mad enough on these subjects to make something of them.' The moment she read the work, it was as if a long lost synthesis of truth suddenly flashed out in her mind. She asked for an interview with the author, and from that first sight of Madame Blavatsky, Annie Besant's whole life was changed. She separated

herself from her secularist friends, and also to some extent from socialism. The new light which she had received inspired her more firmly than ever to the service of the world, but it was now not so much to tinker at various evils in the world's organization, but rather to deal with the root of them all in the light of laws which govern all existence, so that every evil could be eliminated as the result of new outpourings of the streams of life.

Soon after she became Madame Blavatsky's disciple, she came into direct relation with the adept known as 'the Master M.', who was one of two adept founders of the Theosophical Society. Then she knew for the first time that it was He who spoke to her when she thought of

suicide as the way out of her troubles, as also later in her office in Fleet Street.

The record of her work among theosophists needs little mention. She became the most brilliant exponent of Theosophy both as orator and author. After the death of Colonel Olcott in 1907 she was elected President for seven years, and has been re-elected three times. She threw herself into the Society's work as an experienced organizer to 'make Theosophy practical'. Action became her 'slogan' as its President. During her presidentship, the Society has grown by leaps and bounds. When Colonel Olcott died there were only eleven Sections or National Societies; thirty-six more have since been added.

Dr Besant has always been a great traveller, having visited in her theological work nearly all the countries of Europe more than once. She has made several visits to the United States and to Canada, as also to Australia and New Zealand. As soon as travel by aeroplane was practicable, Dr Besant selected this method in preference to the slower one of railways and steamers, because speed is very much a characteristic of her temperament.

Many have been the reform movements in which Dr Besant has worked, or to which she has given her support. She has long been known as an ardent supporter of women's suffrage, not only in Britain but also in India. The League of

Nations Union has received support from her steadily, as she is a firm believer in the work of the League. She is an ardent anti-vivisectionist, and she strenuously opposes any form of inoculation, as she considers that while such remedies are palliatives they fundamentally undermine the resistance of the body. Methods of inoculation she holds are also apt to draw attention away from the more radical method of stamping out disease by clean living and by sanitation. In India she has been an untiring worker for the uplift of women, and has pleaded again and again for a radical change in social conditions, though she has never desired any modification of the Indian woman's temperament, which she holds is one of the most spiritual in the world.

In 1893, on November 16, she landed in India for the first time. Even before this date she had talked of India as her 'Motherland'. As early as 1875 she had championed the cause of India in a pamphlet called 'England, India and Afghanistan'. The transformation of the religious life in India, among Hindus particularly, which Annie Besant brought about, is one of the wonders of her life. She came as a stranger, not knowing Sanskrit; yet as she expounded the old philosophies, she poured forth a wealth of knowledge which amazed cultured Hindus. Far more than her knowledge, however, was her wonderful love of the vanished greatness of India and her indignation at India's sunken condition



which she showed in every address. The older generations of Indians will testify how many of them often wept when they listened to her description of what India might again become some day.

She soon gathered round her a band of Indians to work for the regeneration of the people, and in 1898, after much planning, she founded the Central Hindu College in Benares. There came from Britain and from the United States theosophists to help her in the work of the college. The best known among all these were Dr A. Richardson, Ph.D., F.C.S., who was the first principal of the college; later Dr G.S. Arundale succeeded him. Another most valuable worker was Dr Arundale's aunt, Miss

Francesca Arundale, who started a small girl's school, which is now the Women's College of Benares. Many were the activities of Dr Besant for education, in the cause of which she received liberal support from many an Indian prince and nobleman. A brilliant band of workers gathered round her to make the Central Hindu College the type of what an Indian educational institution should be; among these were Messrs. Bhagavan Das, Govinda Das, Gyanendra Nath Chakravarti, Upendranath Basu, I.N. Gurtu, the late P.K. Telang, and many others who worked in an honorary capacity and in a spirit of wholehearted and dedicated service. After the college was taken over by Pandit M.M. Malaviya

to become the nucleus of the Hindu University, her great services to the success of the college were recognized by making special legislation to give her a seat on the governing body. The degree of Doctor of Letters was conferred upon her as a special distinction and in recognition of her services to Indian education. The college no longer needing her, Dr Besant organized the Theosophical Educational Trust, with several schools and colleges. This was later transformed into the Society for the Promotion of National Education, with vast aims for a complete reconstruction of education throughout India. Almost every political leader was on its committees. Political events, however,

put an end to this large scheme, and it reverted once again to the smaller educational trust.

Dr Besant also organized a movement called 'The Sons and Daughters of India'. For children she initiated the 'Golden Chain' movement, now active in Scotland, Spain, U.S.A. and several countries in South America. In 1918 she organized the Indian Boy Scout Movement, in which the boys wore Indian turbans and sang Indian songs, while in all other ways they obeyed the Scout Law. When Lord Baden-Powell came to India, his movement and that of Dr Besant were amalgamated, and in recognition of her services he made her 'Honorary Scout Commissioner for

India'.<sup>1</sup>

Many attempts were made by Dr Besant to bring about reforms in Hindu social life, and one such was the organization called 'The Stalwarts', who pledged themselves not to marry their daughters under the age of 16. Very few joined, and this activity of hers was not fruitful.

A new phase of Dr Besant's activity began when she became attached to two Indian boys, then fourteen and eleven, and pronounced the elder of them, Krishnamurti, as the vehicle in the future of a great 'World Teacher'. As the boy

<sup>1</sup> Only a few days after these lines were written in India, Lord Baden-Powell in London sent her the highest Scout distinction, that of the 'Silver Wolf'.

was not brilliant mentally, far less so than his younger brother, such a statement appeared ludicrous to all who knew the boy and his family. The father of the boys was one of her own disciples, and in the beginning he handed over the guardianship of the boys to her, in order that they might receive a far finer education than he, as a poor man, would be able to give them. Later, he quarrelled with her and desired to remove the boys from her guardianship. As the boys were far more attached to her than to their natural father, they refused to go back to him, and Dr Besant defended their interests when a case was brought against her by their father. Once again, as twice before, Dr Besant was her own counsel

and day after day pleaded her case. She lost the case in the lower Court, but costs were given against the plaintiff, and the boys were made wards of Court, and in addition their minority—eighteen years under Hindu law—was prolonged to twenty-one years. Then she took it to the High Court of Appeal, where she again lost it but each party was ordered to pay its costs. Then she took the case up to the Privy Council, and in 1914 for the first time the boys, now eighteen and fifteen, appeared as interveners to state their side of the case. Dr Besant won in the Privy Council, the Council holding that the minors should have been represented in the original suit, and that it should have been brought in England where the

minors were resident. The Privy Council laid down the principle that when dealing with minors who had come to an age of discrimination, no judge should dispose of them as if they were mere 'bales of goods', but that the minors themselves should be consulted regarding their ideas as to their welfare.

The development of Krishnamurti, and particularly his announcing a standpoint quite distinct from that of most theosophists, has been, one of the striking events in the last five years. While he differs from Dr Besant, yet all realize that she had a wonderful intuition when she picked him out and said 'Ecce Homo'—*This is the Man*—for Krishnamurti is undoubtedly one of the most brilliant and



forceful of ethical teachers in the world today, if not the foremost.

In many ways Dr Besant will perhaps be most famous in India for her political work. She has said again and again that she entered politics to save the youth of India. She knew from contact with high-spirited lads burning with a zeal of patriotism how they were slowly being captivated by the gospel of extremism of the Bengal anarchist revolutionaries. She saw how the government merely suppressed agitation, but did little to remove grievances. Precious time was being lost, and more and more young men were being attracted to the gospel of violence. She entered the political arena in 1913. She started a weekly newspaper

called *The Commonweal* in January, 1914, and a few months later she purchased the *Madras Standard*, a daily paper. In the August of that year she changed its name to *New India*.

Some day a great historian will have to write her life in this aspect of her as a politician. It is scarcely possible here to say more than a few words on the matter. Her first action was to use all her force to draw together the two sections of the Indian National Congress which had been divided at Surat in 1907. These two sections were represented by Mr B.G. Tilak and Mr G.K. Gokhale. There were certain radical points of difference between them which seemed insuperable, but Dr Besant brought the two groups

together on a common platform of the 'All-India Home Rule League'. Its creed as formulated by her in 1915 was as follows:

WHAT DOES INDIA WANT?

To be free in India, as the Englishman is free in England;

To be governed by her own men, freely elected by herself;

To make and break ministries at her will;

To carry arms, to have her own army, her own navy, her own volunteers;

To levy her own taxes, to make her own budgets;

To educate her own people;

To irrigate her own lands, to mine her own ores, to mint her own coins;

To be a Sovereign Nation within her own borders owning the Paramount Power of the Imperial Crown, and sending her sons to the Imperial Council.

Britain and India hand in hand, but an India free as is her Right.

Ten months after she began her political work, the Great War broke out. It was then that British statesmen committed a radical blunder which made matters difficult for Indians as the war developed. Mr Lloyd George turned to

the Dominions and said in brief: 'Help us to win the war; after it is over there shall be a new "ideal" between us and Imperial affairs after the war there should be close consultation with the Dominions. But turning to India, he said, 'Help us to win the war'—and completely left out any word regarding what India's future should be after the war. India was called upon to make great sacrifices, which she gladly made, but not a single word was said by any British statesman as to India's position after the war was won. It was this vital blunder of British statesmen that convinced Dr Besant that the political work in India had to continue, and not be modified or slackened because the

Empire was at war. Had England said *one word* to the effect that there would be a 'new deal' between Britain and India after the war, there is little doubt that Dr Besant would have not gone on at the time with her political agitation. Not only most British statesmen in Britian, but more particularly every Briton in India, official or merchant, scoffed at the idea of Indians being fit for home rule or dominion status for generations to come—if ever at all. So the denseness of British statesmen had to be counteracted by driving harder than ever the movement for India's freedom. It will be seen from the ideals which she proclaimed that not only was there never any dream of the independence of India,

but there was a clear enunciation that India was to remain a member of the British Empire under the headship of its Sovereign.

Dr Besant was a brilliant organizer, and brought about a great change because she always insisted and hammered. She took as her motto not only 'Strike the iron while it is hot', but also 'Make it hot by striking'. She taught Indian journalists what they did not know before, and that was to write strong leading articles denouncing the action of the government, yet to keep all such denunciations completely within the letter of the law. In other words, she brought to Indian journalism the method of criticism which is characteristic of the *London Times*

—strong, forcible, based upon fact, yet not criticising petulantly.

In 1916 she was 'externed' by the Government of Bombay so that she could not enter Bombay Presidency. The Central Provinces also externed her, and in 1917 the Government of Madras 'interned' her. But so powerful was the reaction in India following upon her internment that within three months British policy had to be changed. No statesman in Britain nor the British officials in India seemed at all to realize that Dr Besant was not an agitator working up an agitation, but rather a far-sighted patriot who saw the need to open up a festering wound whose poison would otherwise permeate the whole



organism. As soon as she was released, the popular wave of enthusiasm was such that she was elected the President of the Indian National Congress which met in December.

But once again she started another precedent. Hitherto the President of the Congress had merely presided during four days' meetings, and then retired into inactivity. Dr Besant made the President's office one of executive importance for the whole year. As President of the Congress she went on organizing activities and presiding at meetings of Congress Committees and so on.

Scarcely three years had passed when the great position which she had won among Indians was practically lost by her

so far as the general public was concerned. This was when Mr M.K. Gandhi launched his campaign of 'Non-Co-operation' against the British Government, calling upon lawyers, school-boys and others to 'non-co-operate', because of the injustices committed by the government. One part of his campaign was the breaking of certain laws, which were to be announced to the people, and such infraction was to be a political demonstration to bring pressure to bear on the government. To break a bad law because it was bad and to suffer for it individually with a view to changing it into a good law—that Dr Besant could support; but, to break a bad law, not because it was bad but because it

was *law*—that she could not suffer, because that made for anarchy and lawlessness. Dr Besant thoroughly believed in ‘passive resistance’, where the individual pits his conscience against an evil law, dares to break that law and suffer the law’s penalties, but only in order that the evil law might later be changed. But she refused to countenance the breaking of any general laws not selected by the individual, but thrust upon him at the dictation of someone else’s policy, and particularly as a way of bringing pressure to bear on government policy.

This divergence between her and Gandhiji has persisted steadily, because she has held that any movement for ‘mass action’ or ‘direct action’ released forces

which must degenerate into violence and will in the long run be to the detriment of India's national life. She has stood by the constitutional method for political reforms, and has openly challenged the policies of Gandhiji on this matter, while having a profound regard for him as one who lives a most saintly life.

Though she became unpopular and lost her position as a leader, she still went on with her work for India. Hardly had the Montagu-Chelmsford Reforms been initiated in 1921, and the new councils met in Delhi and in the provinces, when Dr Besant immediately organized a movement for the next and final step towards India's freedom. This movement crystallized as the 'National Convention',

and its aim was to draft a bill which would represent India's conception of her place in the British Empire as *The Dominion of India*. Several gatherings of many of the leading politicians in India took place and they met at several sessions of this national convention, and finally the 'Commonwealth of India Bill' was drafted and agreed upon in 1925. This bill was to be presented to Parliament to be passed by it. By it India was to be made a full Dominion, but with the reservation of the two departments of Army and Foreign Affairs. The bill however was to enact that, without any further action of Parliament, the Indian National Government could itself declare when it was ready to take over these two

departments. The bill was accepted officially by the British Labour Party, and one of its members presented it to Parliament, where it was read for the first time. It was, however, not read a second time, and so lapsed.

It is in this bill that there was enunciated a unique system of graded franchise, which Dr Besant and others considered was the only system suited to india with her millions of illiterate villagers. The franchise was arranged by gradations, with first, a universal franchise for men and women for village administration. There was a more restricted franchise with higher qualifications for the taluk, more restricted still for the district, and so on for the province and for

all India. There was to be a complete equality as between women and men in all matters of political representation. Dr Besant has never believed in merely counting heads without examining what is inside the heads, as is the principle of universal suffrage. She has been utterly against any system which would put upon the villagers responsibility for decisions concerning all-India legislation.

There is little need to speak further concerning Dr Besant's political activities. She is undoubtedly no longer recognized as a leader, but on the other hand she has made practicable many a change which has made success easier for the present leaders. Her policy has been misunderstood both by the government and

by the Indian public. She has been blamed by the government for denouncing it, and blamed by Indians for supporting it; for her policy has been 'For India', and she has supported the government in whatever was rightly done, even if it made her unpopular with Indians. The Earl of Willingdon, the Viceroy of India today, when he relinquished office in 1924 as Governor of Madras, wrote to her what is the truth on the matter:

I shall never forget our first meeting here when you referred to this incident and said: 'We bear no ill-feeling for that !'<sup>1</sup> Well, you

<sup>1</sup> Lord Willingdon was Governor of Bombay when he 'externed' her and so prevented her entering the Bombay Presidency in 1916.



certainly haven't and I am sincerely grateful for it. You have criticised me when you have thought me wrong; you have generously supported me when you thought me right. If I could get all editors to deal equally honestly with this humble individual I should feel life to be much easier.

No biography, however briefer, of Dr Besant can be complete without reference to a phase of her life and activity little known to the public, but of the utmost consequences so far as she herself is concerned. This is her occult life. When Madame Blavatsky passed away, she had gathered round her a band of students dedicated to the idea of discipleship, working under Rishis or Masters of the Wisdom. Two years after Madame

Blavatsky's death, Dr Besant became the head of the esoteric organization known as the 'Esoteric School'. Since then she has had a following of several thousands of members of the Theosophical Society throughout the world who have looked to her as their spiritual instructor. Those who came into intimate contact with her have known how much she has achieved in yoga, and how therefore her guidance is based upon first-hand knowledge on many occult matters. She has constantly used certain of these yoga powers, particularly that of clairvoyance, to investigate the nature of the superphysical realms, and many have been her books on this recondite subject, her work being usually in collaboration with her colleague

C.W. Leadbeater. A remarkable piece of work done by both was the examination of the chemical elements of chemistry by means of clairvoyance. This record of work, begun in 1895, is still being continued, and it has added a most striking contribution to the knowledge of the atom, parallel to that which is being discovered by physicists and chemists.

Similarly, the biographer has to note another striking activity of hers. In the year 1902 she associated herself with a French Masonic Organization called 'The Supreme Council of Universal Co-Masonry'. This body, composed of certain members of the Grand Scottish Symbolical Lodge of France, an offshoot of the Supreme Council of France, in

1882 admitted women as Freemasons. In 1902 Dr Besant joined them with other friends, and the Co-Masonic Movement has since then spread into nearly all the countries where English is spoken. She is an ardent Freemason, and has thrown a great deal of her enthusiasm into the cause of Brotherhood, as developed in this secret organization. Owing to her outstanding ability and her rôle in world affairs, the Supreme Council of Co-Masonry gave her high rank, and her official title is: The V . . . Illus. . . Bro. . . Annie Besant 33°, First Sovereign Lieutenant Grand Commander of the Order, and Representative of the Supreme Council for the British Federation. Within her jurisdiction in

Great Britain, the Dominions and Dependencies, there are today one hundred and sixty-one Masonic groups, composed of Blue and Mark Lodges, Holy Royal Arch and Rose Croix Chapters, two Encampments and one Consistory.

No one will really understand Annie Besant unless due value is given to an unusual factor in her character, which is, her intense devotion to India as her motherland, and to the Indian people as her people. She has said that the moment she lands in Bombay and sees the brown faces at Ballard Pier she feels she is at home among her own people. From the first year of her coming to India she not only lived with Indians, but she lived as

one of them. She wore the sari, the Indian woman's robe, she sat cross-legged on the ground or on a chowki (a kind of divan) at work, she ate seated on the ground in Hindu fashion and not at a table, using the right hand and not spoon or fork. Of course in Europe she reverted to European ways, but in her own mind the Indian ways were her *natural* ways. She has herself explained one reason for this instinctive feeling, that she has had of late several Indian incarnations, and that her last one, before the birth as Annie Wood, was in India, and that from the close of that Indian life and the beginning of the present one there was only a gap of three years. She recollected incidents of that life, and particularly how she was

then the granddaughter of the adept who is now her guru.

No wonder then that almost from the day of her arrival she idealized Indian ways. She seemed to know intuitively the old and original reason for many a custom which today appears meaningless and outworn. She illuminated the dim corners of Hindu traditions, and seemed to many like some sage of old living today surrounded by the atmosphere of the noblest age of India. Many a Hindu woman thought of her as semi-divine, a channel of divine blessing to men and a worthy recipient of whatever men had to offer to a divine cause. I have known Hindu women—widows particularly—bring her jewels, saying, 'Mother, use

them', knowing that the Mother would distribute in charity with a fuller discrimination than was theirs. I have seen a man at a railway station platform as the train was leaving put in her hands, without saying what was in it, an envelope with notes for ten thousand rupees; the reason was the same. That is why, when the government of Madras 'interned' her in 1917, she became for a while the living symbol of 'Mother India', and why when the crowds shouted the patriotic cry 'Bharat Mātā-ki-jai'—Victory to Mother India—there was a fervour and immediacy of realization such as had not been possible before with any leader of the national cause.

What are Dr Besant's outstanding gifts?



First and foremost, she is a fighter. Dash, courage, initiative, these characterize her. But she is also intuitive and far-sighted. Bernard Shaw once said of her:

Mrs Besant is a woman of swift decisions. She sampled many movements and societies before she finally found herself; and her transitions were not gradual; she always came into a movement with a bound, and was preaching the new faith before the astonished spectators had the least suspicion that the old one was shaken.

She is intensely magnetic, but she does not dominate. She is the first to meet an opponent more than half-way. She is both fiery and dispassionate—fiery to denounce a government's evils, yet dispassionate to see and to denounce also

the excesses of her own beloved Indian people. She is without a particle of resentment towards anyone who opposes her, for she believes he must be aiming to do his duty. She sees things in large sweeps and leaves details to others. In her technique she is the artist. The most popular and significant name for her is 'Mother'. Many an Indian ruler has called her that, and hundreds of thousands of lesser folk. She has always encouraged youth in every land, never dampened its enthusiasms because some of its plans were not the wisest.

I have known her since 1895. She has encountered much obloquy and opposition; few have been her triumphs. But her warrior spirit has never been

daunted. In days to come, many great biographies of her will be written. I can conceive of no truer biography of her than in these three words: *She made men.*





